

Sam is fulfilling his boyhood hopes

THE boyhood wish of Sam North to run the Wirksworth restaurant he regularly visited with his family, became a reality in March 2006 when he was appointed manager of Le Mistral. This was formerly known as Number Twenty-Three but in Sam's day was called Raffles, owned by a chef from Holland, Taeke Oosterwoud. He recognised that Sam possessed a passion for cooking and, later, helped him choose his first cooking knives.

Sam grew up with an interest in the kitchen. One family memory is of the young Sam preparing salad dressing. He talked all the way through the preparation, as if he were a TV chef. Ever since he has thought there was a link between cooking and performance: "Whether I'm working in a kitchen or serving behind a bar, to me it's like being on stage."

After attending both Wirksworth infant and junior schools, Sam entered Anthony Gell School in 1990. While taking his O Levels, he began to date a girl who shared his interest in becoming a chef. On leaving school, he followed her to London where they both applied for jobs at Monkey Island Hotel. "For some reason we believed this to be in the Caribbean. But to our disappointment we discovered it was in Maidenhead!" This was Sam's first sight of a working kitchen, but to his regret the job required him to set out the function and banqueting rooms, serving tea and coffee. "I remember having to wear a bow tie and waistcoat." Throughout this time, he became increasingly envious of what was happening in the kitchen. "My girlfriend and the others seemed to be having a lot more fun".

After working in Scotland and travelling around Europe, Sam returned to work as a junior sous chef at the Silver Springs hotel in Jersey. "This was great because I had to cover all sections and it gave me a good overview of the whole kitchen."

On returning to Derbyshire, Sam eventually joined the Strand restaurant in Matlock where he was apprenticed and sent to High Peak College at Buxton. He then moved on to the East Lodge hotel as a chef where he gained his NVQ Levels 2 and 3.

Sam eventually got a job as a sous chef at the Bluebell Inn near Belper and worked there for a year. He loved the people he worked for and enjoyed creating dishes and writing menus.

When his eight-year relationship finished, Sam decided it was time to move on. Seeing an advert in the window of Le Mistral asking for a head chef he decided to apply. The owner, Jim Anderson, was also looking for a head chef for his restaurant in Sherwood, Nottingham, and soon

Sam found himself with the responsibility of running two restaurants, then a third when Jim opened a second in Nottingham.

Sam pauses to eat his lunch (omelette and French fries) and begins to reminisce. "As a family, we used to come to Raffles regularly. We always had our Christmas lunch here so I had known the then owners' daughter, Saskia, ever since she was a little girl. When, in November 2005, the adult Saskia came into Le Mistral with her parents, I saw her as I stood behind the bar and I thought, "Mm...she looks nice!" He then decided to ask her out. "It took me two months to actually make a date because she was always on another shift working as assistant manager at the Rendezvous in Matlock. In the end, I sent her a note."

Sam beamed: "On New Year's Day 2006 I received a text message from her saying she would like to meet me for coffee. Three months later she moved in to my house in Wirksworth and then ... three months later she was pregnant! I was uneasy having to tell Taeke, who had been so kind to me, but in fact he was very supportive. He even gave me a hug!"

Heather was born on 26 March 2007 and in November, after a reshuffle, Sam became manager of Le Mistral. It has been hard work ever since, Sam says, but he has loved every minute of it. "I try to stick to classical French/European combinations such as moules marinières and frites, beef bourguignon and garlic and tarragon chicken, but I have also incorporated a range of vegetarian dishes and occasionally introduced an Asian dish."

Le Mistral is described in a restaurant guide as a "very perky restaurant, with an accomplished style and approach". There are lunch and dinner menus with 50 choices and a daily special. Sam says, they have "exorcised" the cellar and refurbished it with soft lighting, bright cushions and dried flowers. "We now have our own website, we have 14 staff most of them from Wirksworth. We're selling Fairtrade wines and teas and we are re-cycling all our glass, plastic and cardboard."

Clearly, Sam's paternal pride and



joy is beginning to extend to Le Mistral, where he has recently designed a children's menu and provided a high chair.

He enjoys all aspects of his job, but mainly working in the kitchen. "Most food is cooked here. One has to be flexible according to how busy the restaurant is but the crème brulée is mine!" *SF*